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AUTHOR Herzog, Tobey C.
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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a freshman composition course that is taught through the use of sports literature. The first part of the paper considers the merits of a literature-based composition course, the value of a topic-oriented approach to writing, and the benefits of reading and writing about sports. The second section discusses sequential course units, in which students participate in the following activities: general discussion and free writing on the subject of sports; reading samples of sports writing and writing personal narratives and pieces of sports reporting; studying and writing about the role of sports in society; reading literature related to sports and writing short critical essays based on the reading selections; and preparing a final piece of writing in any form. The conclusion of the paper notes the success of the course in motivating students--whether or not they are sports enthusiasts--to read and to write. (GW)

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Tobey C. Herzog
Wabash College
Crawfordsville, Indiana

ED144094

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Sport in the Composition Class[1]

PRE-GAME

After reading David Hamilton's recent article "Writing Coach" (CCC, May 1977), I confess that as a composition teacher I have also fancied myself as a writing coach. Perhaps, this explains the influence of sport on the content and structure of my composition course: the game--teaching freshman composition; the arena --a college classroom; the coach--a concerned English teacher; the players--several unconcerned students; the referees--department colleagues; the equipment--assorted composition materials and a collection of sports literature. I use the term literature in its broadest sense, referring not only to imaginative works but also newspaper articles and essays that have appeared in magazines and journals such as Esquire, Psychology Today, Sports Illustrated, and Chicago Review.

I make no lofty claims as to the course's effectiveness in curing students' writing problems. These problems will not miraculously disappear without considerable hard work on the part of the teacher and students. I do believe, however, that this course serves as one more aid in solving basic teaching problems encountered in the composition class: motivating students to learn, establishing student-student and student-teacher interaction, and above all helping students to read, think, speak, and write.

The Ground Rules: Before using sports literature in the composition class, the teacher should consider three important issues: the merits of a literature-based composition course; the value of a topic-oriented approach to writing; and the benefits of reading and writing about sport. With the renewed calls for a

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back-to-basics mode of teaching composition, controversy over the first issue is particularly heated. Traditionally, opponents of using literature claim this method is a "cop-out"; teachers ignore the basic task of teaching writing and engage in their specialty, teaching literature. Advocates cite the efficacy of using literature to provide rhetorical models and topics of interest.[2] I, of course, support this latter view. I strongly believe that literature should be an important part of a composition course. The use of literature must not, however, become an end in itself but rather a means of broadening students' experiences, giving them something to say, providing writing models, and improving writing skills. Composition teachers frequently complain that their students have "little interest in what they are saying and worst of all have almost nothing to say," leading one teacher to propose that the composition course be delayed until a student's junior year.[3] I am not suggesting that the use of literature will completely eliminate these interest problems. But a careful selection of the literature and a teacher's willingness in allowing students to relate the content to their own experiences can lessen some of the content burdens and give the students more time for communicating these ideas.

My response to the second issue--a topic-oriented approach to composition, reading and writing about sport--seems a logical extension of my stand on the first issue. An in-depth analysis of a subject, particularly one familiar to most students, increases a student's confidence in having something to say and a satisfaction in knowing the worth of this contribution. In addition, the intensive study of one subject serves as an organizing principle for the course, providing continuity to the reading and writing assignments. As the semester progresses, the students have a considerable amount of information and experience ready to be used in their writing.

Finally, the issue of most immediate concern is the effectiveness of sports

literature in the composition class. Despite the snickers that may eminate from some members of the academic community, this body of literature--journalism, expository essays, and creative works--does have an integrity in its form and content. In a society so preoccupied with sport, a study of this institution and its literature as an aid to improving writing skills seems appropriate for college students. Roger Kahn, one of sport's most articulate spokesmen, observes:

> Sport tells anyone who watches intelligently about the times in which we live: about managed news and corporate politics, about race and terror and what the process of aging does to strong men. If this sounds grim, there is courage and high humor, too.[4]

This statement suggests one way (a reflective approach) to use this literature in composition.[5] Students analyze sport as a mirror of society, a means of understanding society's values and workings. In addition, students study the various stylistic elements illustrated in this literature, for example the over-writing syndrome of sports writing, the techniques of narration and description in New Journalism, or the strategies of persuasion in an article on excessive violence in sport. Most important, through a projective approach students use the materials to help them not only understand the athlete but also themselves. What does it mean to be an individual in today's world? To aid students in confronting this question, some of the literature deals with such universal themes as a search for identity, the maturation process, innocence versus experience, and dreams versus reality. Granted, these themes are present in much of literature, but placed within the familiar context of sports, they become readily defined and understood through the students' sports experiences. Thus, students use this body of information with confidence as they write about their life or discuss a theme in a particular work. One result, the writing is frequently as lively as the class discussions.

THE GAME

With these preliminaries out of the way, let's look more closely at the actual game. At Wabash the English Department offers a one-semester composition course for freshmen. Therefore, I've tried to compress the material from a typical two-semester composition sequence (101 and 102) into a one-semester offering. I've structured the course so that it could easily be used in other situations: in its entirety as a 102 course or in sections as part of either 101 or 102.

Warm-Up

General discussion and free writing occupy the first week of class. The students and I get to know each other as we talk about our views on and experiences with sport. The latter range from active participation to very limited encounters; the former include enjoyment, distaste, and suspicion. During this week students do free writing with a focus on sport. I look for Macrorie's "telling facts" and "fabulous realities," which the students might use in some of the later writing assignments.[6]

Sport in Media

In the first unit, Sport in Media (4-5 weeks), reading assignments include samples of sports writing. The purpose is to use these examples of traditional and new journalism to determine the extent to which attitudes toward sports are shaped by the rhetoric of sports writing and by the particular orientation of the sports writer. Our writing interests comprise observation, audience analysis, tone, organi-

zation, paragraphing, sentence structure, and word choice. Practice in the basic rhetorical forms centers on narrative and description. In addition to articles gathered from local newspapers, reading selections include Randall Poe's "The Writing of Sports" (Esquire, October 1974), Grantland Rice's famous report of the 1924 Notre Dame-Army football game: "Outlined against a blue-gray October sky, the Four Horsemen rode again...." (N.Y. Herald Tribune, Oct. 19, 1924); and Pat Jordan's "Designing Woman," an article about a female volleyball player (Sports Illustrated, August 4, 1975). We analyze the sunshine philosophy, sports jargon, and over-writing of the traditional sports writer, such as Rice, and the critical attitude, lively style, narrative and descriptive techniques of new journalists, such as Jordan.

During this unit I ask the students to write one or two personal narratives about their sports experiences. At the end of the unit I ask them to prepare a piece of sports writing, an account of a game or an interview with a sports figure. The report may be based on a real or imaginary event. Frequently, the students respond with perceptive and humorous parodies of sports-writing styles and content:

> Last night in the Little Giant gym, the well-oiled Caveman machine snatched victory from the jaws of defeat as Wabash squeaked out a 101 to 99 victory.

In this unit, as is true in the other two, we spend considerable time with grammar, the writing process (pre-writing, writing, editing), and small-group evaluations of writing samples. There is no pressure to complete a certain number of reading assignments or to finish the unit within the prescribed time period. The pace is geared to the abilities of the class.

Sport in Society

The next unit, Sport in Society (4-5 weeks), contains materials pertaining

to the interrelations between sport, as a cultural and human event, and particular social issues such as race, politics, hero worship, and violence. The central idea is that sport reflects and affects society. We discuss the writing concerns of the first unit and the use of the thesis statement, introduction, and conclusion. The study of essay modes focuses on exposition and argument, with several of the reading selections serving as rhetorical models.

Reading assignments include essays from Sports Illustrated ("A Man Who Hardly Left a Mark"--June 10, 1974), Psychology Today ("Sport Is A Western Yoga"--October 1975), Esquire ("Where Have All Our Heroes Gone?"--October 1974), and Rolling Stone ("King of the Goons: Evil Knievel"--November 7, 1974). The articles deal with various subjects: reasons for sports participation, sport as big business, the sports hero and anti-hero, and the woman's role in sport.

For the writing assignments, I ask the students to use specific information from the readings and discussions, supplemented with personal opinions and experience, to write two themes based on a variety of subjects: the definition of an athlete, the definition of sport, the role of the sports hero in America, violent sport and violent America, and women in sports.

This particular unit evokes spirited discussions about sport, along with controversies and surprises. Many of the students have never thought to critically analyze the institution of sport or to evaluate their relationships with it.

Sport in Literature

Students approach the final unit, Sport in Literature (5-6 weeks), with uneasiness. They never know what to expect, although they are impatient to use the novel purchased at the beginning of the semester. Depending upon the time limitations, I try to cover one book (fiction or nonfiction), a short story, and a

poem--more if time permits. The specific writing objective is using the reading and writing skills developed in the previous units to prepare two short critical essays based on the reading selections. I don't ask the students to do a research paper, but this certainly could be included.

Each of the literature selections exemplifies in a dramatic and creative way issues and themes treated in the previous works or universal themes having a particular significance within the world of sport. The students quickly discover that this literature is not just about sport but is also about life. For example, Roger Kahn in his nonfiction book The Boys of Summer presents an account of the playing exploits of the '52 and '53 Brooklyn Dodgers and their lives eighteen years later. We discuss the obvious issues of race, sport as big business, and the athlete as hero, but we soon move into universal themes of death, fathers and sons, the search for identity, and the maturation process. John Updike's Rabbit, Run explores the adjustment problems confronting an ex-high school basketball star but also deals with larger issues of man's quest for meaningful experience and the demands of self versus the demands of society. Other selections successfully used are Bernard Malamud's The Natural, Don DeLillo's End Zone, Alan Sillitoe's "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner," Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two Hearted River," Ring Lardner's "The Champion," Updike's poem "Ex-Basketball Player," and Gary Gildner's poem "First Practice."

This unit not only provides the students with more information about sports and gives them practice in using a practical essay mode, but it introduces them, in some cases for the first time, to excellent works of literature.

Wrap-Up

In preparation for the final week of class, I ask the students to prepare a

short writing assignment of their choice, which they read to the class. This has resulted in students doing personal narratives about sports, critiques of the class, attacks on sports, responses to specific reading assignments, short stories, poems, and research papers. This week affords the students an opportunity to assess their understanding of sport after a semester of intensive study; it provides me with a chance to bring our semester's experiences to a satisfying close; and more important, it allows all of us the time to assess writing skills developed and not developed during the semester.

POST-GAME COMMENTARY

Admittedly, this course may cause some initial problems for students not involved in sports. However, after reading a few of the informative and controversial essays, they frequently want to learn more about sport. These students, particularly those without sports experience, also approach this subject from a critical and skeptical point of view, making them feel important in class discussions and forcing other members of the class to analyze the topic more carefully. Several of these non-interest students find that the reading assignments can lead them into other areas of interest.

Several colleagues have asked why I feel this course is an effective approach to teaching composition. My answer is quite simple. A recent textbook advertisement contained the following sales pitch: "These texts excite your students, and when they're excited, you're a more creative teacher." I feel the same way about this course. For the most part, the students and I are excited about the material; when we are excited, not only am I a more creative and effective teacher, but the students are also better writers.

ENDNOTES

[1]This article is based on a paper delivered at the 1977 CCCC Convention. I am indebted to Professor William J. Palmer of Purdue University for his suggestions on using sports literature.

[2]See John J. Fenstermaker's "Literature in the Composition Class, CCC, 28 (February 1977), 34-37.

[3]John L. Kimmey, "Freshman Composition in the Junior Year, CCC, 26 (December 1975), 347-49.

[4]Quoted by Randall Poe in "The Writing of Sports," Esquire, October 1974, p. 378.

[5]For a discussion of this reflective-projective approach, see Lee Loevinger's "The Ambiguous Mirror: The Reflective-Projective Theory of Broadcasting and Mass Communications," in Mass Media: Forces In Our Society, eds. Francis and Ludmi la Voelker (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1975), pp. 385-401.

[6]Ken Macroirie, Telling Writing (Rochelle Park, N. J.: Haydn, 1970), pp. 32-44.

[7]An Anthology that might be used for this unit is: John T. Talamini and Charles H. Page, eds., Sport and Society: An Anthology (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973).

[8]Two anthologies might be consulted for this particular unit and the other two: Henry B. Chapin, ed., Sports in Literature (New York: David McKay, 1976); Robert L. Higgs and Neil D. Isaacs, eds., The Sporting Spirit: Athletes in Literature and Life (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977). See also Louis Kampf's "A Course on Spectator Sports," CE, 38 (April 1977), 835-42.